

Building Through Adversity

Nehemiah 4:1-18

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Introduction:

Tonight, we are going to examine a portion of the book of Nehemiah where Nehemiah and the Jews who were with him building the wall faced some very real adversity. But before we look into the text, let's talk about that word adversity for a moment.

Adversity can be defined as "an event or series of events which opposes; calamity; affliction; a state of serious continued difficulty/misfortune".

Louie Zamperini was a man who knew adversity. If you recognize his name but can't remember who he is, you may remember the movie UNBROKEN which was made about his life.

Louie was born to two Italian immigrants in 1917. Growing up in Torrance, CA (about an hour from here give or take) he quickly became a track and field star. In 1936, at the age of 19, Louie competed in the Olympics in Germany. Five years later, Louie joined the United States Army Air Forces.

He served in WWII as a bombardier in B-24 Liberators in the Pacific. On a search and rescue mission, Zamperini's plane experienced a mechanical malfunction and crashed into the ocean. After drifting at sea on a lifeboat for 47 days, with two other crewmates, he landed on the Japanese occupied Marshall Islands and was captured as a prisoner of war.

He was taken to two different prisoner-of-war camps in Japan where he was tortured and beaten by Japanese military personnel—specifically by Mutsuhiro Watanabe, who really had it out for him because of Zamperini's status as a famous Olympic runner. He was later taken to a new prison camp at a coal factory, and after much adversity, he was finally released when the war was over.

Following the war he initially struggled to overcome a battle with post-traumatic stress. He later became a Christian evangelist with a strong belief in forgiveness. From 1952 onwards, he devoted himself to at-risk youth.

Adversity can make or break you. Louie's life was full of successes and setbacks. He grew up in a very rough environment yet overcame and ended up succeeding in the Olympic Games. He succeeded in the Army Air Forces but experienced setback when his plane crashed landed and was stranded at sea where he ultimately became a POW for two years. He succeeded in making it through all the torture and pain only to experience another setback and struggle with PTSD when he returned to America. Finally, he succeeded in forgiving his torturers and living for God. Louie's life is a testimony of what it means to overcome adversity.

Today in Nehemiah 4, we're going to learn just how Nehemiah and the Jews would respond to the adversity they faced.

At this point in the book of Nehemiah, a lot has already taken place. Earlier on, Nehemiah's heart was burdened when he heard the condition of Jerusalem. Nehemiah cries out to the Lord, asking God for forgiveness on behalf of his people's rebellion and for favor in the sight of King Artaxerxes. One day Nehemiah is in the presence of the king and is visibly sad. The king basically asks him what's up to which Nehemiah tells him of the burden on his heart for his home city of Jerusalem that was in ruins. Because God had given him favor with the king, the king asks Nehemiah "what can I do for you?". It's awesome because in this short moment Nehemiah cries out to God, in his head, and asks the king for permission to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its walls. The king grants this request of Nehemiah and sends him on his way to do what was in his heart to do. Nehemiah goes and begins this effort of rebuilding the wall with a team of Jews who also wanted their beloved city to be rebuilt. The work is moving along until Nehemiah and the builders encounter adversity, which leads us to our text tonight.

1. The Adversity They Faced

So here in the beginning of chapter 4, we learn of these two guys: Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite.

Sanballat and Tobiah lived around Jerusalem and were not happy at all about the Jews rebuilding the wall. They were pagan enemies of the Lord who did not have any regard for the God of Israel. Ultimately these guys were instruments of Satan who was the number 1 opponent of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its wall just like how he is the number 1 opponent of every child of God.

1 Peter 5:8 "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."

Sanballat comes against them and is MAD. It says in verse 1 that he was furious and very indignant, meaning that he was full of anger and wrath because of what the Jews were doing.

Look back down in your Bibles at verses 2 and 3 and see how Sanballat and Tobiah mocked the Jews and their work of rebuilding the wall:

Sanballat- "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish—stones that are burned?"

Tobiah- "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall."

Ultimately, what Sanballat and Tobiah were trying to do was discourage Nehemiah and the Jews from continuing the work of God. They were simply puppets of Satan.

This closely relates to the Christian life. If you are a true Christ follower, then you are to be actively involved in building the kingdom of God and spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Don't hear what I'm not saying: I am not saying what those of the NAR movement teach where we are the ones who bring heaven down to earth. That is not Biblical. Christ is the one who will one day bring heaven down to earth at the 2nd Coming. We simply get to ride behind Him on horses as He establishes His kingdom on earth. In the meantime, we are to be busy about the work of the unseen kingdom of God that Christ taught about in His earthly ministry.

Unfortunately, many Christians are not very engaged in this kingdom-building work at all, but those who want to fully live for God and please Him in all they do, know that this is what we are to be doing.

Satan absolutely hates when we are doing this work of building God's kingdom (like Sanballat and Tobiah hated the rebuilding of the wall). God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom are in direct opposition with one another. Satan's kingdom is of this world. Jesus refers to him as the "ruler of his world".

Because God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom are diametrically opposed to one another, any attempt to build God's kingdom is an attack on Satan's kingdom, which is not something he likes. In the end, we know that God will destroy Satan's kingdom at the Second Coming of Jesus but until then we are to be actively fighting back against it every single day.

Satan uses the same methods to scheme against us. He makes every effort to stop us from living for Christ and being effective kingdom-builders. Understanding what some of his schemes are is one of the initial steps in fighting back against him. Though there are many ways he tries to do this, I want to focus on 3 of them tonight with you:

#1 SIN

This is one of the main ways that Satan keeps us from living fully for the Lord and building the kingdom. He wants us to live lives of sin because he knows that when we're living sin-filled lives, we will be ineffective in building God's kingdom.

We all know that when we're entangled in sin, we won't be doing anything useful for the Lord, nor will we likely want to.

If you are a child of God but you're bound up in a life of sin, repentance is just a prayer away. I can remember crystal clear the day that I rededicated my life to the Lord after having backslid for a season: my Father truly was there with arms stretched wide waiting to welcome back his wayward son.

1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

#2 LIES/DECEPTION

Jesus called Satan "the father of lies". If Satan can get us to believe the lies that he propagates about God, about ourselves, about what's sin vs what's not sin, about the world's ways, etc. he can effectively stop us from living fully for Christ and building God's kingdom.

So, what are some of Satan's lies he uses against us?

"God doesn't love you", "God's not with you/you're all alone", "God can't use someone like you, you're too messed up", "you're worthless", "no one cares about you", and the list goes on and on and on.

As we grow in the Lord, we ought to become better at discerning what thoughts and lies are from the enemy. The Bible commands us to take these thoughts captive and bring them into the obedience of Christ.

Illustration: thoughts being shot like fiery arrows into our mind, analyzing them according to what the Scriptures say, and making those thoughts to obey Christ

#3 DISCOURAGEMENT

Satan is so good at making us discouraged. He knows that if he can keep us discouraged, he can make us not want to be a part of what God is doing.

This is precisely the tactic that Sanballat and Tobiah used against Nehemiah and the Jews. As Nehemiah and the Jews are rebuilding the wall, tweedle-dee and tweedled-dum are mocking them all along the way.

Be assured of this truth if you are ever mocked or ridiculed for your faith, the Word of God says “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked” (Galatians 6:7).

Too many Christians tend to walk around always discouraged. Satan will use challenging life-circumstances, other people, or whatever to keep God’s people in a place of discouragement but the Bible tells us that it is the JOY of the Lord that is our strength.

God is not in the business of making us discouraged. When we fall, when we’re weary, when we’ve hardly got anything left, God stands us back up and tells us to move forward again.

Proverbs 24:16 “For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, But the wicked shall fall by calamity.”

Regarding this topic of discouragement being a tool of the enemy, let this story minister to you:

“Legend has it that one day the devil was having a garage sale and put his tools out, marking each one with a price. Some of the tools included were hatred, envy, jealousy, deceit, lying, and pride. Laid apart from these was a rather harmless looking but well-worn tool marked at an extremely high price.

A buyer pointed to this isolated tool and asked, ‘What is the name of this tool?’

The devil replied, ‘That is discouragement’.

The buyer responded, ‘And why have you priced it so high?’

To which the devil said, ‘Because it is more useful to me than the others. I can pry open a man’s heart with that when I cannot get near to him with the other tools. Once inside, I can make him do whatever I choose. It is badly worn because I use it on almost everyone, since so few people know it belongs to me.’

The devil’s price for discouragement was so high, it is said, that this tool was never sold. He continues to use it on God’s people, causing spiritual growth to be stifled and many worth-while Christian projects to grind to a halt”

These are just 3 common ways that Satan tries to stop us from living for Jesus and building God’s kingdom. I would encourage you all to go get the book “Strategies of Satan” by Warren Wiersbe to be better equipped in identifying the ways the enemy seeks to come against us.

Back to Nehemiah 4, a few verses down in verses 7-8 and 10-12 we see that Sanballat, Tobiah, and the surrounding nations get word of the progress of the wall, and they are UPSET. These enemies of God's people hear that the gaps of the wall are being closed and so they get together to plan how they could attack the Jews building the wall and confuse the work they were doing. These nations were literally on all sides of Jerusalem: the North, South, East, and West. Nehemiah and the Jews were surrounded.

Listen to a portion of this Psalm of David when David recalls times when he too was surrounded by the enemies of God...

Psalm 27:1-6

“1 The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?

2 When the wicked came against me To eat up my flesh, My enemies and foes, They stumbled and fell.

3 Though an army may encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, In this I will be confident.

4 One thing I have desired of the Lord, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the Lord, And to inquire in His temple.

5 For in the time of trouble, He shall hide me in His pavilion; In the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock.

6 And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me; Therefore I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the Lord.”

Nehemiah and the builders had been making significant progress by this point in time and because they were making progress, their enemies rose against them.

Satan absolutely hates it when we're making progress in our walks with Jesus. You can be assured that as you grow in the Lord and get more involved in building His kingdom, there will be an increase in spiritual warfare in our lives.

It's a pretty simple equation, \uparrow ***SPIRITUAL PROGRESS*** = \uparrow ***SPIRITUAL WARFARE***.

So now that we've look in depth at the adversity that Nehemiah and the builders faced, lets now look at...

2. The Appeal They Made

Nehemiah responded to this adversity by appealing (PRAYING) to God!

What comes to my mind here is George Washington's prayer at Valley Forge. George Washington, like Nehemiah, appealed to God in the face of overwhelming adversity and God responded!

Look at the transition from verse 3 where Nehemiah and the builders are being mocked to verse 4. Literally the next verse is Nehemiah praying to God. Nehemiah knew exactly what to do with the adversity: he gave it to the Lord.

We need to learn from Nehemiah's example here. When Satan attacks our lives and brings adversity upon us, we need to go straight to the Lord in prayer.

Prayer is how we fight.

You've all heard and sung along to the song "Battle Belongs" and know that line that says "So when I fight I'll fight on my knees with my hands lifted high, oh God the battle belongs to You."

This should be how every Christian handles adversity. Unfortunately, I think too many people struggle in their walks with the Lord when adversity hits because they try to handle it on their own and do not go to the Lord in prayer. What will you do when adversity comes to the doorstep of your life?

There's an old hymn called "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" that some of you may know that has some powerful words regarding what we're talking about here:

"Oh, what peace we often forfeit

Oh, what needless pain we bear

All because we do not carry

Everything to God in prayer"

Are you encountering adversity or really going through some difficult spiritual warfare? Be like Nehemiah and take it directly to the Lord in prayer.

Another man in the Bible who faced adversity with prayer was King Hezekiah. I apologize in advance for my butchering of these ancient names, but ignore my mispronunciation and follow along.

2 Kings 19:8-19, 35-36

8 Then the Rabshakeh returned and found the king of Assyria warring against Libnah, for he heard that he had departed from Lachish. 9 And the king heard concerning Tirhakah king of Ethiopia, "Look, he has come out to make war with you." So he again sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, 10 "Thus you shall speak to Hezekiah king of Judah, saying: 'Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you, saying, "Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria." 11 Look! You have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands by utterly destroying them; and shall you be delivered? 12 Have the gods of the nations delivered those whom my fathers have destroyed, Gozan and Haran and Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? 13 Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, and the king of the city of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivah?' "

14 And Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord. 15 Then Hezekiah prayed before the Lord, and said: "O Lord God of Israel, the One who dwells between the cherubim, You are God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. 16 Incline Your ear, O Lord, and hear; open Your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has

sent to reproach the living God. 17 Truly, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, 18 and have cast their gods into the fire; for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands—wood and stone. Therefore they destroyed them. 19 Now therefore, O Lord our God, I pray, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You are the Lord God, You alone.”

35 And it came to pass on a certain night that the [d]angel of the Lord went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand; and when people arose early in the morning, there were the corpses—all dead. 36 So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went away, returned home, and remained at Nineveh. 37 Now it came to pass, as he was worshiping in the temple of Nisroch his god, that his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer struck him down with the sword;

How awesome is it that Hezekiah took the very letter into the house of the Lord, spread it before God, and prayed to the God of Israel. Hezekiah understood that...

PRAYER CHANGES THINGS AND IS HOW WE FIGHT

But in addition to praying, Nehemiah and the builders also took action...

3. The Action They Took

What I love about Nehemiah's response is that he didn't just pray, he also took action.

Right after his prayer in vs 5, it says in vs 6: “So we built the wall...”

We see how Nehemiah and the builders *stayed the course* and did not let the adversity they faced steer them away from the job they knew God had called them to do.

Nehemiah shared the same mindset/motivation of Paul the apostle...

Acts 20:22-24 “22 And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. 24 But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

Nothing was going to stop Nehemiah from completing the work that God had given him to do. Because “the people had a mind to work”, the rebuilding of the wall was moving very quickly.

In verses 9 and 13 we see how Nehemiah first prayed then took action by setting a watch against the adversaries.

A good principle to remember regarding prayer is that ***PRAYER OUGHT TO BE PAIRED WITH ACTION.***

If you're praying for a job, you don't just pray for the job and sit on you bum all day! You pray and you go do your part by submitting applications! Prayer paired with action.

Many of us fail to pray in this way. A lot of believers are more than willing to pray but there are a lot less who will pair their prayer with action. We see this especially in the realm of politics. It's not the case here at this church, but there are far too many Christians who will say they will pray but will not take action when evil is advancing!

May it not be so of us. May we be like Nehemiah who prayed and took action!

D.L. Moody, the famous evangelist was on a trip across the Atlantic Ocean when a fire broke out on the ship. Moody and his friend joined the crew and other volunteers by passing buckets of water to be thrown on the fire. Moody's friend said to him, "Mr. Moody, let us go to the other end of the ship to pray." The common-sense evangelist replied, "No sir; we stand right here and pass buckets and pray hard all the time!"

Prayer paired with action.

We've looked at the adversity that Nehemiah and the builders faced, the appeal to God they made, the action they took, and now our last point tonight is...

4. The Almighty They Trusted

Nehemiah and the builders would've had every right to fear Sanballat and Tobiah's threats if they weren't actively trusting in God Almighty.

Were the Jews outnumbered and outgunned? Absolutely they were but it didn't matter because they knew that the Lord of Heaven's Armies was on their side, and it was *HIS work* that they were doing.

When the Jews who got word of the plans of Sanballat, Tobiah, and their armies came and told Nehemiah and the builders there was likely a lot of fear instilled in them. But Nehemiah turns to the people, like a scene straight out of "The Lord of the Rings", and says...

Vs 14 "Remember the LORD, great and awesome and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses."

When faced with adversity as we seek to build God's kingdom, we must remember the power of the God we serve. We serve the God of all creation, the Lord of Hosts, the Commander of the Lord's Armies. We have no reason to fear.

Yahweh Nissi- "the Lord is our banner (of victory)"

Look at this faith-boosting verses from when Israel would soon inherit the Promised Land...

Deuteronomy 3:22 "You must not fear them, for the Lord your God Himself fights for you."

Deuteronomy 31:6 & 8 "6 Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you." "8 And

the Lord, He is the One who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed.”

Joshua 1:9 “9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

You see, Nehemiah and the builders no doubt trusted in the Lord, but they did not forgo their responsibility to defend the wall and fight back against evil.

Truly we are living in the days where evil is advancing rapidly. We are to absolutely 100% trust the Lord, but we must also get in the fight! Gone are the days of “Spectator Christianity”! How can the Church bury it’s head in the sand in the face of such evil times?!

Because of the evil that surrounded them, Nehemiah and the builders built the wall with one hand and carried a weapon in the other! I love this!

We are living in the days where with one hand we build, with the other we fight!

Illustration: meme of parenting in 2023 (shield blocking rainbow, demons, etc. as parent protects their little ones in bed reading a story)

This is how we should be as citizens of heaven engaged in a war against ungodliness and unrighteousness! Trusting God doesn’t mean that we sit on the sidelines and don’t fight back. We trust God AND we engage in the battle!

Now before we all go grab some pitchforks and torches, we must remember that the fight we’re engaged in is a spiritual one, not a physical one...

2 Corinthians 10:3-6 “3 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal (physical/earthly) but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, 6 and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.”

This is the fight we are in. Though it is a spiritual battle, we can see it taking place all around us. What will you and I, as Christ followers, do?

Conclusion:

In closing, my prayer for all of us is that we would be effective builders of God’s kingdom. We mustn’t let any adversity sway us from this resolve.

Satan is against us. All of his demons are against us. This world is against us. BUT God’s Word gives us this amazing promise in the book of Romans chapter 8

Romans 8:31 “31 What then shall we say to these things? ***If God is for us, who can be against us?***”

This is the difference maker: our God is for us and is on our side.

Will we let adversity sway us from our purpose to live as salt and light in this world?

Proverbs 24:10 “10 If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.

We need not faint in the day of adversity because we can give everything to God in prayer and trust Him because it is HIS work, not ours, that we are doing in this ungodly world.